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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOL. XXIX.

BALTIMORE, NOVEMBER, 1914.

No. 7.

## SOME RELATED POEMS OF WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

Professor Legouis in his *Early Life of Wordsworth* has pointed out that Coleridge's unfinished poem *The Three Graves* is closely related in subject to *The Ancient Mariner* and to *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*. He says of the poem, "The fundamental idea was the same [as that of *The Ancient Mariner*]; that of the desolation wrought by a curse in a terror-stricken heart." And after discussing *The Three Graves* he continues, "Finally Wordsworth determined that he would himself give concrete form to the idea of a curse. He found a subject ready to his hand in a scientific work, Darwin's *Zoonomia*. This was the story of *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*."

I should like to carry the discussion further, by attempting to show that *The Three Graves* is related not only to *Goody Blake*, but in still more important ways to Wordsworth's *Thorn*, and that *The Thorn* and a related piece, *The Danish Boy*, may be regarded as progressive steps toward the composition of *Hart-Leap Well*, Wordsworth's final imaginative treatment of the curse.

### I

By Coleridge's own account *The Three Graves* was composed somewhat more than twelve months before September, 1809, that is, in the summer of 1797 or a little earlier. Dykes Campbell points out that the scenery of the poem is that of Stowey and Alfoxden. In other words, it dates from the period in which Coleridge and Wordsworth were in almost daily companionship, closely united by their common aspirations, and even attempting to write in collaboration, as in the case of *The Wanderings of Cain* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

The subject of *The Three Graves* was supplied by Wordsworth, as he informed Barron Field: "I gave him the subject of his Three

Graves, but he made it too shocking and painful, and not sufficiently softened by any healing views." Wordsworth's statement that he furnished the subject is of course not to be questioned. Rather, as in the case of his statements regarding his contributions to *The Ancient Mariner*, it is to be taken as revealing far less than might be claimed for him. It is true that in the long discussion prefixed to *The Three Graves* in *The Friend* and in *Sibylline Leaves* Coleridge says nothing of any obligation to Wordsworth, but it is also true that he makes only the slightest admission of his obligations to Wordsworth in planning and composing *The Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge sometimes was reluctant to acknowledge his indebtedness to others. He does, however, explain his reasons for choosing the story for poetic treatment, namely, "from finding in it a striking proof of the possible effect on the imagination, from an idea violently and suddenly impressed on it. I had been reading Bryan Edwards's account of the effects of the *Oby* witchcraft on the Negroes in the West Indies, and Hearne's deeply interesting anecdotes of similar workings on the imagination of the Copper Indians . . . ; and I conceived the design of showing that instances of this kind are not peculiar to savage or barbarous tribes, and of illustrating the mode in which the mind is affected in these cases, and the progress and symptoms of the morbid action on the fancy from the beginning."

The reader who turns to Bryan Edwards (1793) and to Hearne (1795) will indeed find curious instances of Jamaica negroes and Hudson Bay Indians losing heart, pining away, and dying on learning that a spell had been put upon them by a reputed wizard, in one case, Hearne himself. This is the entire extent of their relation to *The Three Graves*. It is to be noted that Hearne's *Account of a Journey . . . to the North-west* is the book in which Wordsworth found the suggestion of his *Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman* (1798). Wordsworth's wide reading in books of travel

suggests that as in the case of Shelvocke's *Voyage*, the book may have been known to himself before it was known to Coleridge.

The features which *The Three Graves* shares with *The Ancient Mariner* are features which that poem owes to Wordsworth, namely, the idea of a curse as the fundamental motive, and the incidental connection with a book of travel in remote regions. It has still closer affinities to *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, for, as Coleridge informs the reader, it is founded upon an actual incident of rustic life in England, "of no very distant date," and it has to do with the fulfilment, under superstitious fear, of a vengeance invoked in the form of a curse.

*Goody Blake and Harry Gill* is customarily assigned to 1798, the year of its publication. But Wordsworth himself (in the Fenwick note) says only, "Written at Alfoxden." The internal evidence indicates that it was very likely the earliest written of all the poems under consideration. The story is told directly, by the poet himself, without shifting the responsibility for the marvelous upon a superstitious narrator, invented *ad hoc*, as is done in *The Three Graves* and *The Thorn*, and the "curse" is a malediction arising from a sense of personal injury and literally fulfilled, a notion more primitive and less artistic than the feeling of mysterious retribution which appears in *The Thorn*, *The Danish Boy*, and *Hart-Leap Well*. The poem must almost certainly be earlier than *The Three Graves* and *The Thorn*, and may have been written not in 1798 but in the previous year.

That *The Three Graves* owes to Wordsworth more than its mere subject is suggested by a comparison with *The Thorn*, apparently begun March 19, 1798, and published in the *Lyrical Ballads*. In this village tragedy there is no explicit curse, but Martha Ray and the scene of her supposed crime both seem to be affected by mysterious powers. Deserted by the lover who has promised to marry her, she at first goes mad. Then, as in the case of Ruth, her senses return. Day and night she haunts a spot upon a mountain, near a thorn, a heap of moss-covered earth, and a pond. The village folk believe that she has murdered her

child and buried it beneath the hill of moss. Mysterious signs are said to point to her guilt. In a note published in 1800, Wordsworth discusses at some length the form into which he has thrown the story. It is supposed to be related by a man "credulous, talkative, and superstitious," such a man, for example, as the captain of a small trading vessel, a man past middle age, retired upon a small income to a village or country town of which he is not a native. "It appeared proper to me to select a character like this to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind." In *The Three Graves* Coleridge adopts a similar device: "The tale is supposed to be narrated by an old Sexton in a country church-yard." In both poems the speaker is an old man, garrulous, superstitious, and of humble station. Moreover, the poems begin in similar fashion. In each case the point of departure is a thorn-tree, of peculiar appearance, standing near a supposed grave or a group of graves:

There is a Thorn—it looks so old,  
In truth, you'd find it hard to say  
How it could ever have been young,  
It looks so old and grey.  
Not higher than a two years' child  
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;  
No leaves it has, no prickly points;  
It is a mass of knotted joints,  
A wretched thing forlorn.  
It stands erect, and like a stone  
With lichens it is overgrown.

. . . . .  
And, close beside this aged Thorn,  
There is a fresh and lovely sight,  
A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,  
Just half a foot in height.

. . . . .  
This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,  
Which close beside the Thorn you see,  
So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,  
Is like an infant's grave in size,  
As like as like can be;  
But never, never anywhere  
An infant's grave was half so fair.

*The Three Graves* begins,

Beneath this thorn when I was young,  
This thorn that blooms so sweet,  
We loved to stretch our lazy limbs  
In summer's noon-tide heat.

And hither too the old man came,  
The maiden and her feer,  
Then tell me, Sexton, tell me why  
The toad has harbour here.

The thorn is neither dry nor dead  
But still it blossoms sweet;  
Then tell me why all round its roots  
The dock and nettle meet.

. . . . .  
Why these three graves all side by side  
Beneath the flow'ry thorn,  
Stretch out their lengths so green and dark,  
By any foot unworn.

In both poems, also, the narrators represent objects as moving mysteriously under supernatural influence:

And Mary on the bridal-bed  
Her mother's curse has heard;  
And while the cruel mother spake  
The bed beneath her stirred.

That is, it seemed to rock, as if the house, or perhaps the very earth, were shaking. A similar marvel is related in *The Thorn*:

And some had sworn an oath that she  
Should be to public justice brought;  
And for the little infant's bones  
With spades they would have sought.  
But instantly the hill of moss  
Before their eyes began to stir!  
And, for full fifty yards around,  
The grass—it shook upon the ground!  
Yet all do still aver  
The little Babe lies buried there,  
Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

Both poems, in keeping with the nature of the supposed speaker, are frequently homely in their diction. *The Thorn* originally contained the lines,

I've measured it from side to side;  
'T is three feet long, and two feet wide.

*The Three Graves* also contains passages which remind one more strongly of what Wordsworth said in the *Advertisement* to the *Lyrical Ballads* of the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes than of Coleridge's habitual diction:

Oh, Ellen was a faithful friend,  
More dear than any sister,  
As cheerful too as singing lark;  
And she ne'er left them till 't was dark,  
And then they always missed her.

. . . . .  
Our late old vicar, a kind man,  
Once, Sir, he said to me,  
He wished that service was clean out  
Of our good liturgy.

It is not too much to say that *The Three Graves* not only owes its subject to Wordsworth, but in its general character and in its execution presents much that is characteristic of the Wordsworth of 1797-1798. These features point not merely to a general Wordsworthian "influence," but to specific suggestions from Wordsworth in planning the poem, or to the adaptation of processes and details from *The Thorn*. The latter supposition conflicts with the dates as given by Coleridge and by Dorothy Wordsworth, but *The Three Graves* may have been begun later than Coleridge afterwards believed, and even *The Thorn* may have been planned and partly composed before the date on which Dorothy records the writing of the opening stanzas. Perhaps the hypothesis which best accounts for the relation between the two poems is this. Wordsworth supplied Coleridge with the subject of *The Three Graves* and with definite suggestions for its treatment. He subsequently learned that Coleridge felt himself unable to complete the poem, and had virtually abandoned it. Coleridge indeed may have so informed him. He thereupon made use himself, not of the subject which he had furnished to Coleridge, but of the incidental means of treating it which he had provided. He thus made effective use of his ideas, and at the same time satisfied himself of their soundness and value.

## II

*The Thorn* is a powerful and a skilfully composed poem. The figure of the desolate outcast,

known to every star  
And every wind that blows,

stirs the imagination and haunts the memory. Ominous hints in the opening stanzas prepare the reader for the mystery and terror to be developed later. In a letter to Sir George Beaumont, May 1, 1805, Wordsworth wrote, "The poem is a favourite with me." And in the last book of *The Prelude*, recalling the happy period of his residence at Alfoxden, he speaks of the summer when Coleridge was wont to chant

the vision of that Ancient Man,  
The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes  
Didst utter of the Lady Christabel;  
And I, associate with such labour, steeped  
In soft forgetfulness the livelong hours,  
Murmuring of him who, joyous hap, was found  
After the perils of his moonlight ride,  
Near the loud waterfall; or her who sate  
In misery near the miserable Thorn.

None the less *The Thorn* has never found great favor with readers. The garrulity and the homely diction of the supposed speaker, especially as they appeared in the earliest version of the poem, are a handicap, and further the piece is open to the same objection which Wordsworth raised to *The Three Graves*: it is "too shocking and painful, and not sufficiently softened by any healing views."

Mr. Nowell Smith calls attention, in a note in his edition of the *Poems*, to the close relation between *The Thorn* and the fragment of *The Danish Boy*, composed in 1799. The stanzas are identical, except that the first and third lines have now been made to rhyme. Only seven stanzas were published, and of these the next to the last was never reprinted by the poet after 1800. In a smooth and open dell there stands a tempest-stricken, blasted tree, and by it a corner-stone, last remnant of a lonely hut. The spot is shunned by beast, bird, and bee, for here sits and sings the spirit of a Danish boy. The omitted stanza is especially reminiscent of *The Thorn*:

When near this blasted tree you pass,  
Two sods are plainly to be seen  
Close at its root, and each with grass  
Is covered fresh and green.  
Like turf upon a new-made grave

These two green sods together lie,  
Nor heat, nor cold, nor rain, nor wind,  
Can these two sods together bind,  
Nor sun, nor earth, nor sky;  
But side by side the two are laid  
As if just sever'd by the spade.

Wordsworth explained in 1827 that the poem was to have related "the story of a Danish Prince who had fled from Battle, and, for the sake of the valuables about him, was murdered by the Inhabitant of a Cottage in which he had taken refuge. The House fell under a curse, and the Spirit of the Youth, it was believed, haunted the Valley where the crime had been committed." The idea of a curse, that is, still appears, but has been transferred from the offender to the scene of the evil deed. And in the slow process of time the curse has been partially lifted; the haunting spirit is a thing not of terror but of beauty, and the haunted spot is "sacred to flowerets of the hills." Wordsworth was apparently on his way to composing a poem which in feeling and in artistic treatment would have been a much more faithful expression of his spirit than were *Goody Blake* and *The Thorn*, but the poem was laid aside, perhaps because in *Hart-Leap Well* he found a subject that enabled him to give final and perfect form to the conceptions which he had been seeking to express.

In December, 1799, on a journey with his sister, Wordsworth passed a spring about five miles from Richmond in Yorkshire. A peasant whom they met near the spot told them the name of the spring, Hart-Leap Well, and the story of the death of the hart, and pointed out the three pillars said to commemorate the leaps of the hart. A few weeks later he wrote his poem, published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. In the final arrangement of his poems he significantly placed *Hart-Leap Well* immediately after *The Thorn*. In this poem, again, there is no uttered curse, but the desolateness of the scene is interpreted by the shepherd as a curse laid upon the spot by Nature in penalty for the crime of cruelty:

"A jolly place," said he, "in time of old;  
But something ails it now; the spot is curst."

The thorn-tree reappears. The actual tree by the spring is said to be a lime-tree, but Wordsworth changes it to a thorn. The waters of the spring tremble with the last breath of the hart as in *The Thorn* the creeping breeze causes the waters of the little pond to stir, and in the belief of the shepherd,

oftentimes, when all are fast asleep,  
This water doth send forth a dolorous groan.

The grey-headed shepherd, needless to say, takes the place of the old sexton in *The Three Graves*, and of the sea-captain, past middle age, "credulous and prone to superstition," of *The Thorn*. The poem is recognizably a companion piece to these, with resemblance both in content and in plan.

*Hart-Leap Well*, however, departs from *The Thorn* and *The Three Graves* in important particulars. The moving accident, Wordsworth has come to feel, is not his trade, and the curse is not an act of human hatred, something "shocking and painful," but a slow manifestation of Nature's displeasure, a symbol rather than an act of vengeance. Moreover, it is "softened by healing views":

She leaves these objects to a slow decay,  
That what we are, and have been, may be known;  
But at the coming of the milder day  
These monuments shall all be overgrown.

The great drawback of the old captain and the old sexton had been their prosiness. The combination of superstition and realism had seemed to require that the stories of *The Thorn* and *The Three Graves* should be told by elderly, credulous, and commonplace persons, fated to garrulity and involving danger to serious interest. In *Hart-Leap Well* this difficulty is overcome by a simple device. In the first part the narrative is given by the poet himself. It is in the second part that he explains how he had heard it:

The Shepherd stopped, and that same story told  
Which in my former rhyme I have rehearsed.

Then follow the shepherd's comments. Thus the literal facts and the legend which has

sprung from them are kept distinct. The shepherd, thus managed, has all the advantages, and more, of the sexton and the sea-captain, with none of their disadvantages. Thus in form of presentation, no less than in subject and conception, *Hart-Leap Well* appears as the final product of an evolution of which the successive steps had been *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, Wordsworth's share in *The Three Graves*, *The Thorn*, and *The Danish Boy*.

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## FURTHER NOTES ON CLASSIC LITERARY TRADITION

### I

In an article which appeared in the December (1912) number of *Modern Language Notes* I called attention to traces in French and German literature of the Middle Ages of a well-defined literary tradition which owed its origin to Greek literature, especially that of the Alexandrian period, and much of its vitality to the fact that it had found lodgment in the rhetorical schools. This tradition, I have also tried to show,<sup>1</sup> can be traced down through Latin, early French, and Italian literature to the literature of modern times, and I should like to add a few more examples to those which I have already adduced as evidence of its persistence.

This tradition manifests itself most clearly in erotic poetry and romance,—in the literature which deals with love, its nature and its effects. The history of some of the commonplaces employed to describe these effects I have given in the article referred to above, but much more can still be written on this phase of the subject. In order to keep within bounds in the matter of examples, I shall content myself with citing those only which seem to me to illustrate best the continuity of tradition from

<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Am. Jour. of Philology*, XXXIV, 1913, pp. 125 sq.